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ABSTRACT

This paper names and describes a common, growing, and dangerous psychological syndrome: Youth Violence Syndrome (YVS). YVS is characterized by at least nine behaviors: (1) hopelessness; (2) a complete or great disregard for the laws followed by most Americans; (3) a short temper combined with a lack of empathy; (4) a desire for respect from others where such respect has not been earned; (5) an act or acts of violence against another person; (6) unemployment or employment in a minimum- or low-wage job; (7) an extremely high desire for expensive consumer goods; (8) acting-out to obtain expensive consumer goods illegally; and (9) a high school drop-out or a high school graduate with deficient reading and math skills. Also discussed are the causes of this syndrome, including the social conditions that make someone susceptible to YVS. Although YVS appears to be an essentially psychological syndrome, psychotherapeutic techniques to ameliorate its effects on an individual are yet to be determined. Social interventions directed toward improving the quality of an individual's life will probably be more effective in changing and preventing YVS than any psychotherapy. A multifaceted approach to the problem of youth violence is necessary, one that includes real educational as well as economic opportunity. (RJM)

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YOUTH VIOLENCE SYNDROME(YVS) AND AMERICAN SOCIETY

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Youth Violence Syndrome (YVS) and American Society

by Dr. Scott B. Sigmon

Significant examples of a growing wave of youthful violence in America are becoming more commonplace. Three serious signposts have appeared: (1) Rapidly escalating illicit drug usage accompanied by deadly crimes in rural areas, the sort of which was found previously only in more built-up areas; (2) the so-called post-modern "inner city"--which I prefer to call less euphemistically and more politically incorrectly, a ghetto--was never a pleasant, tranquil place to live or work, has become a literal war zone; and lastly, (3) the ultimate middle-class living nightmare, desperate hopeless unemployed ghetto youths seriously breaking the law in the suburbs at a geometrically growing rate! Moreover, horrific drive-by shootings and carjackings are becoming typical, with the latter becoming frequent occurrences in the suburbs as well. It is difficult to overlook these types of incidents; yet, paradoxically, we have become accustomed to them and have learned to live with them. Consequently, a sense of great urgency is not present, but their frequency and intensity move us to take action. Problems of any kind, eventually, reach a point where something must be done; and, when problems are serious, even if not urgent, comprehensive undertakings must be enacted.

Before we can discuss solutions to such problems, we need to attempt to understand fully their causation, so that we increase our chances of rapidly ameliorating them. The usual reasons given are deplorable poverty, welfare dependency, substandard housing, homelessness, racism, inferior education, little economic opportunity, joblessness, limited chances for worthwhile careers, etc. In fact, life in some American cities today is so dangerous and stressful it actually is similar to being in a combat zone. It is my position that these unfortunate aspects of social life are in actuality not so much the cause of social problems, but merely their surface effects.

The real root causes of social problems are a complex combination of factors, a primary one being economics. Simultaneously, the political structure (laws and powerful instruments of enforcement; e.g., the police, courts, and even the military) is designed to maintain the existing economic system; and aspects of the USA's economic system are quite problematic and can produce a dangerous "psychology of alienation" among the disadvantaged. What evidence is there for such a bold statement? The U.S. federal government is willing to accept, and actually encourages, "structural" unemployment! Even a level of six percent unemployment, deemed acceptable by the U.S. government, impacts negatively on millions and millions of Americans. Why is this acceptable? Because unemployment keeps wages low and profits high in a capitalist-based economy such as the USA's.

Social institutions such as governments (as do living organisms) usually try to survive and perpetuate themselves. Governments use carrots and sticks. The U.S. government began using carrots in the 1930s not merely to help its people, but also to prevent a revolution. The threat of governmental force is usually enough to control its citizens, but not in all situations. In the United States of America there has never been a limit on accumulated wealth or income for the most affluent segment of the population. Contradistinctively, there is no guaranteed minimum income. However, since the great economic depression of the 1930s, there have been numerous government programs and regulations instituted to care for and subsidize the less forutnate; e.g., welfare, minimum wage, farm supports, unemployment insurance, social security, Medicare and Medicaid. Other social supports, including some type of universal health care, are being proposed. It is the "zeitgeist" of modern American society to provide such aid for the needy, not only for humanitarian reasons but to preserve the nation. Also, American resources are used to help (as well as influence) people of other nations.

We in America find the prospect of having a "permanent underclass" (previously called the "lumpenproletariat" by earlier social critics) totally abhorrent. Why? Because it is not in line with our American mores regarding fairness, opportunity, and helping. Moreover, having a permanent impoverished class runs counter to the "American dream"/Horatio Alger myth which assumes that anyone can strike it rich with hard work and luck; and, it is this upward mobility social class myth, I believe, which actually keeps American society functioning as well as it does for most of the

population. The violent youthful members of today's so-called underclass suffer from an extreme form of existential hopelessness; they do not feel a part of mainstream American society at all, and they do not believe, both consciously and unconsciously, in the American dream. Some establishment folks may believe this happened virtually overnight, but it did not: It is the result of two or more disenfranchised generations of people, which is why the result is so entrenched.

Social problems, which naturally influence an individual's psyche, are in many ways more complex than difficulties in the physical sciences, so we should instead begin to comprehend the bigger question: What holds a society together? Or, what produces social cohesion? And, more importantly, what keeps an equitable society functioning? It appears that much, probably most, of American society functions well, or it would not be the longest existing very large democracy. Today's America provides a relatively good life to most of its citizens. Nevertheless, a substantial part of America's population--small in percentage, but large in relative numbers--is forced to live in squalor. Sociologists would say that societies which function well have effective positive and negative social sanctions; essentially, these are rewards and punishments for certain behaviors.

I believe that for a growing percentage of people living in America, the old social sanctions, both positive and negative, are no longer effective. Why? When someone is alienated from one's society, such an individual has no stake in that social system. As a result, the social sanctions which usually work to hold that

individual's worst tendencies in check no longer apply. In other words, this sort of person would actually carry out deeds which others who are tied into the social system, except under the most extreme situations (such as a crime of passion), would never act upon. Granted, we all think at times of following up behaviorally on our aggressive thoughts, but we generally never do so. For example, when someone cuts us off while we are driving in traffic and proceeds to curse at us, we would like to retaliate physically, though we rarely do.

Advertising is the part of the USA's economic system which is so powerful and potentially insidious; it not only keeps the flow of dollars moving quickly, but can fuel a pathological desire for consumer goods. Advertising is so incredibly sophisticated and successful today in the USA that it very greatly raises the level of consumer desire. We are constantly bombarded with ads telling us we want and need all sorts products--even though we usually do not. The combination of this powerful consumerism frenzy (created by successful commercial advertising, which keeps the U.S. capitalist economy going) along with a significant proportion of the population without the legal financial means to buy these products yields an energized and sometimes enraged populace. We would hope that the economically disadvantaged would work legally or work harder to gain the financial means to buy what they desire. But remember, those most alienated are cut-off from the legal economic mainstream.

Let us turn now to the psychology of the adolescent and young adult. They are tremendously influenced by group norms, and especially by their peers. Moreover, they have entered their

physical peak and have feelings of invulnerability. For these reasons, people in their late teens and early twenties become the best soldiers. This is the normal psychological development for all humans.

The confluence of the natural psychological development of youth, the strong desire to purchase or possess consumer goods without the financial means, and social alienation produces a frightening scenario. These factors, in addition to perverse peer group attitudes which encourage respect at all costs and the acceptable use of guns, add up to ultraviolence. How is this manifested? It results in the unnecessary killings during armed robberies after victims have already given up their possessions or money and pose no danger to the perpetrator, or in a drive-by shooting whereby the shooter merely perceived the target person had earlier insulted him. Cars are stolen for transportation with the justification that the thief would never be able to purchase it, so it is O.K. to steal it. But worst of all is when a group of alienated youth randomly kill strangers without any motivation, other than for fun!

This sort of serious youthful violence is often associated with gangs ("gang bangers" or "gangstas") and their sometimes organized criminal activities, such as the control and enforcement of illicit drug sales. Selling illegal drugs may be seen as the only way to earn more than the minimum wage. However, random and deliberate grave aggression is sometimes perpetrated by individuals, pairs, and small groups for frivolous reasons. This violent behavior is not true anarchy, although it seems to border upon it. There is no real organized national ghetto youth political effort to bring down the

government and replace it with anarchism or anything else; but there certainly is disorder and gross lawlessness in some quarters. The growing "youth violence syndrome" (YVS) is closer to the "anomie" phenomenon described by the early great French sociologist Emile Durkheim at the turn of the 20th Century. While studying suicide, he came to believe that anomie, a sense of estrangement from the values of the larger social group, was its chief modern cause. I do not believe youthful offenders who engage in violence against others are necessarily self-destructive, even though many probably do not believe they will live to be very old and some may be suicidal.

Death usually produces thoughts of life. However, an increasing number of violent adolescent/young adult deaths to one's peers makes an individual believe that life will probably be short, and end quickly plus bloodily. This yields an amplified "live for the present" forget about working hard and planning for the future mind-set--planning is typical of the middle class. Thus, there is a strengthened "devil may care" attitude in a group already normally prone to engage in risk-taking and thrill-seeking behavior. Combine this with a disregard for the personal well-being and property rights of others, primarily due to hopelessness, plus alienation, and your imagination will yield a glimpse of the horrific potential of such individuals. The final result, of course, is what I refer to as "youth violence syndrome" (YVS). Obviously, those with YVS are extremely dangerous; and, it is because, among other things such as new found strength due to physical maturation, they are easily capable of committing homicide.

There is apparently no real articulated counterhegemonic ideology among the so-called underclass with YVS, although one might develop. Continued oppression in the form of, for all practical purposes, a caste-like system, could do it--although a major act of government brutality would more likely trigger it. Rap/hip-hop music artists are perhaps quasi-spokespersons for poor ghetto youths and young adults; although most such artists, especially the financially successful ones, have really been coopted themselves, and therefore their "messages" must be questioned. The same was true with the earlier rock and folk artists, but the Viet Nam war back then was a politically unifying event, the type of which is now essentially absent.

To take a strong position in declaring a previously unnamed psychological condition, youth violence syndrome (YVS), exists, one must also cite its criteria. Thus, YVS can be characterized by all or most of the following where present for a period of six months or longer: (1) Hopelessness regarding ever attaining the "American dream" defined as a relatively comfortable life economically in a reasonably safe neighborhood; also, alienation from mainstream America must be present; (2) a complete or great disregard for the current laws and values of the majority of those living in American society; (3) a short temper often combined with a lack of empathy for others; (4) a great desire for respect from others where such respect has not been earned, with a concomitant confusion between what constitutes real respect and ordinary civility; this is typified by someone who maintains the attitude that it is O.K. to shoot someone who insulted or was superficially disrespectful; (5)

one act of violence against another person using a deadly weapon, or two acts of violence against two or more individuals without a deadly weapon (guns, knives, etc.); (6) unemployed, or employed in a minimum or low wage job usually in the fast-food industry; (7) an extremely high desire for expensive consumer goods such as clothing, jewelry, and/or motor vehicles; (8) the acting-out to illegally obtain expensive consumer goods, with or without the use of force; and (9) educationally being a high school drop-out or a high school graduate with much less than 12th grade reading and math skills. These "symptoms" actually provide a YVS profile, and it is apparent that much of this "psychological disorder" is caused by social and economic conditions--because environmental features outside the individual's psyche have created them! Thus, the question remains, why do some but not all individuals develop YVS? As with other functional (non-organic) psychological syndromes, such individuals are predisposed to acquiring it and were exposed to the conditions which create YVS.

The solutions to the social ills I have previously described are complex and require serious remedies. Yet, one thing is certain, the schools alone cannot solve them; but, the schools can be part of the solution, especially in the area of moral education. A multifaceted approach to the problem of youth violence is necessary, one that includes real educational as well as economic opportunity, and a new approach to our society's serious drug problems. Because, without hope, there is alienation which is the root cause of today's rapid growth of violent crime in a segment of our younger population.

In conclusion, this piece was written to describe and name a common, growing, dangerous psychological syndrome: YVS. Discussed was what causes this syndrome and its criteria. The social conditions which make someone susceptible to YVS were covered briefly; yet, this is a separate political issue. Finally, although YVS is an essentially psychological syndrome, psychotherapeutic techniques to ameliorate its effects on an individual were not delineated; these have yet to be determined, but as with most other physical or psychological pathology, YVS of shorter duration (most likely with younger individuals) would yield a better prognosis. Social interventions regarding improving the quality of an individual's life will probably be much more efficacious to changing and preventing YVS than any psychotherapy; otherwise, hiring more police and building more criminal courtrooms and prisons will continue to be the inadequate response.

About the Author

Dr. Scott B. Sigmon is a licensed clinical psychologist in part-time private practice in New Jersey, and a full-time assistant professor of counseling at The William Paterson College of New Jersey. He holds permanent certification in school psychology from the states of New Jersey and New York, and he does part-time work for New Jersey schools. In addition to having had many articles published in professional psychological journals, Dr. Sigmon has written two books, "Radical Socioeducational Analysis" (1985, Irvington Publishers, New York) and "Radical Analysis of Special Education" (1987, Falmer Press, London), and edited a third, "Critical Voices on Special Education" (1990, State University of New York [SUNY] Press, Albany, N.Y.).